

Bojana Aćamović
 Institute for Literature and the Arts, Serbia

2020, Vol. 17 (1), 41-55(164)
 revije.ff.uni-lj.si/elope
<https://doi.org/10.4312/elope.17.1.41-55>
 UDC: 82.091
 821.111(71).09Atwood M.
 821.111(73).09Barth J.

Replenishing the *Odyssey*: Margaret Atwood's and John Barth's Postmodern Epics

ABSTRACT

The paper focuses on Margaret Atwood's novel *The Penelopiad* and John Barth's short stories "Menelaïad" and "Anonymiad," comparing the approaches of the two authors in their postmodernist retellings of Homer's *Odyssey*. Both Atwood and Barth base their narratives on minor episodes from this epic, with its less prominent or unnamed characters assuming the roles of the narrators. Using different postmodernist techniques, the authors experiment with the form and content of the narration, combine different genres, and demythologize the situations and characters. In their re-evaluations and reinterpretations of the *Odyssey*, they create works which epitomize Barth's notion of postmodernist fiction as a literature of replenishment. The comparative analysis presented in this paper aims to highlight the ways in which Atwood and Barth challenge the old and add new perspectives on Homer's epic, at the same time confirming its relevance in the postmodern context.

Keywords: Margaret Atwood; John Barth; postmodernism; mythology; *Odyssey*

Dopolnitev *Odiseje*: Postmoderna epa Margaret Atwood in Johna Bartha

POVZETEK

Prispevek obravnava roman *Penelopina preja* Margaret Atwood in kratki zgodbi »Menelaïad« in »Anonymiad« Johna Bartha ter primerja pristopa obeh avtorjev k postmodernistični priredbi Homerjeve *Odiseje*. Atwood in Barth svoje pripovedi opreta na stranske epizode v omenjenem epu in neimenovane osebe postavita v vlogo pripovedovalcev. S pomočjo različnih postmodernističnih tehnik se avtorja igrata z obliko in vsebino pripovedi, preigravata žanre in demitologizirata prizore in pripovedne osebe. Z novo preučitvijo in interpretacijo *Odiseje* ustvarita dela, ki utelešajo Barthov koncept postmodernistične fikcije kot dopolnitvene književnosti. Primerjalna analiza v prispevku osvetljuje načine, s katerimi Atwood in Barth prevprašujeta stare in nove poglede na Homerjev ep, pri tem pa utrjujeta njegov pomen v postmodernem kontekstu.

Ključne besede: Margaret Atwood; John Barth; postmoderna; mitologija; *Odiseja*

1 Introduction

Re-examination and re-evaluation of familiar stories from the past, questioning accepted truths and devising alternative versions to replace the existing ones have become the defining features of postmodern literature. In line with Lyotard's remarks on the decline of the grand narratives as authoritarian metadiscourses that posit indisputable universal truths and an increased interest in the plurality of competing small narratives, the postmodernists have turned their attention to individual events and characters, considering them from different angles in order to offer a more comprehensive picture of what happened. This approach is adopted when the "what-happened" refers to historical events as well as those depicted in the fiction of previous ages. Mythology has attracted particular interest as a vast repository of narratives suitable for retelling and revising.

Along with the *Iliad*, Homer's *Odyssey* is considered a foundational text of the Western literary canon. Rooted in the oral tradition of epic singing and covering a range of topics related to the universal human experience, it has remained attractive for millennia and inspired many works of art, music, and literature. In its themes and content, the *Odyssey* is significantly different from the *Iliad*, which is suggested by the very names of the two epics: while the latter points to a place, Ilion or Ilium (that is, Troy), the first is derived from a personal name and thus suggests a more personal story. The story of Odysseus, a cunning and adventurous king of Ithaca, who spends ten years engaged in the Trojan War and then another ten trying to return to his kingdom, conveys tales of the fantastic occurrences that befall the hero on his journey back home, but also portrays the circumstances of domestic life, social norms and customs in ancient Greece, as well as some common features of human nature. Its universality and timelessness are what has prompted some authors to use Odysseus's story as a basis for their narratives.

The literature of the late 20th and early 21st centuries has retained an interest in the stories and characters from the *Odyssey*, and the approach to it now reflects the general tendencies and aesthetics of the postmodern age. In comparison to modernism, the postmodernist attitude to classical texts in general is marked by demythologizing, deconstruction, and a lowering of "high" topics to the level of mundane experience, which often produces parodic versions of the originals; thus, it can be said that "where modernism is sincere or earnest, postmodernism is playful and ironic" (Nicol 2009, 2). In this paper we are looking into Margaret Atwood's and John Barth's postmodern reinterpretations of the *Odyssey* in works written almost forty years apart, but sharing some common features in the examination of the epic. Atwood and Barth are, each in their unique ways, distinguished representatives of North American postmodernism, and the *-iads* they wrote inspired by characters from Homer's epic are at the same time reappraisals of the classical European tradition and a confirmation of its lasting value. Challenging the status of myths as "immutable, universal stories," "teleological and transhistorical master narratives in literature," as well as "stories that tell us who we are" (Vautier 1998, ix), Atwood and Barth offer their New-World, or rather, Postmodern-World readings of Greek mythology.

2 The *-iads* of the New World: The *Odyssey* Retold

Margaret Atwood is renowned as a versatile author who has tried her hand at a number of genres, including historical fiction, speculative and dystopian fiction, metafictional fiction, as well as novels based on rewriting or parodying Gothic romances, fairy tales, classics, and stories from mythology. Her dialogue with Greek mythology began with her first poetry collection *Double Persephone* (self-published in 1961) and continued with her giving voice to characters such as Helen of Troy, Daphne, Circe and the Sirens in her later poems. Atwood crowned this interest in the women of classical mythology with the novel *The Penelopiad*, introducing Penelope and her twelve maids as the narrators and focalizers of the story. The novel appeared in 2005 as part of the *Canongate Myths Series*, a project gathering modern authors including Chinua Achebe, Karen Armstrong, David Grossman, Alexander McCall Smith, Victor Pelevin, and Dubravka Ugrešić, each of whom had “a task” to retell a myth of their choice from a contemporary viewpoint. The myth Atwood chose was the Odyssey-saga, and the perspective from which she examines it is predominantly feminist: the protagonist of her story is not the Trojan hero, but his wife Penelope, and alternating with the chapters of her prose narrative are the “Chorus Lines,” performed by the twelve maids who were hanged by Telemachus towards the end of the epic. Aside from the feminist reading that unavoidably asserts itself in relation to Atwood’s work in general, *The Penelopiad* invites a broad range of interpretative approaches and thus can be read as an innovative piece of postmodernist fiction and examined along with two stories by John Barth, an American author who is quintessentially postmodernist but in another vein.

Barth’s contribution to the development of postmodernism extends beyond his fiction-writing. Apart from the novels and short stories that now serve as model texts of postmodern literature, Barth wrote theoretical pieces, the most significant of which are two essays on the condition of contemporary literature: “The Literature of Exhaustion” (1967) and “The Literature of Replenishment” (1980). The “exhaustion” refers to “the used-upness of certain forms or the felt exhaustion of certain possibilities,” specifically, the decline of the novel as a major form of art (Barth 1984, 64). This, according to Barth, is not necessarily a cause for despair but a challenge for authors to introduce new modes and respond to the changes the new age brings. Rejecting the claims that “The Literature of Exhaustion” suggests “there is nothing left for contemporary writers but to parody and travesty our great predecessors in our exhausted medium,” in “The Literature of Replenishment” Barth affirms that “literature can never be exhausted, if only because no single literary text can ever be exhausted – its ‘meaning’ residing as it does in its transactions with individual readers over time, space, and language” (Barth 1984, 205). As a reader and a writer, Barth himself has repeatedly entered into such transactions, primarily with four fictional characters frequently singled out as pivotal in his creative development: Scheherazade, Don Quixote, Huckleberry Finn, and Odysseus, the “four points in [his] literary imagination,” the “four deities of [his] literary pantheon” (González 2000, 202). In line with this, Barth sees the literature of postmodernism as combining the approaches and phenomena of the previous epochs with those of the modern age, which renders it a literature of replenishment and confirms the inexhaustibility of the art of writing (Barth 1984, 203–6).

Barth published his first short story collection, *Lost in the Funhouse*, in 1968, having already secured his place as a representative of postmodern writing with the novels *The Sot-Weed Factor* and *Giles Goat-Boy*. This “series of stories,” as the author designates it, is experimental in many aspects. For Barth, it was an experiment in form, considering that it was his first attempt at writing short fiction, whereas the subtitle “Fiction for print, tape, live voice” reflects his intention to recognize the increased significance of multimedia in art and literature. A prominent place in Barth’s stories is given to themes and characters from mythology, Christian as well as classical Greek, whose canonized versions are here reworked and presented from a different angle. A special place is devoted to the stories related to the Trojan War and its aftermath, but the focus is shifted from warfare to the background events and episodes only briefly outlined in Homer’s epics. Barth’s fascination with Odysseus’s adventures is best reflected in the two final stories of the collection: “Menelaiad” and “Anonymiad.”

The titles of Atwood’s novel and Barth’s stories, all three containing the suffix -iad, suggest that readers will be introduced to the life and adventures of notable personalities presented in the elevated style of epic poetry. In *The Penelopiad* and “Menelaiad” the titles disclose who these personalities are: Penelope, the wife of Odysseus, and Menelaus, the king of Sparta and Helen’s husband. However, what readers find in these works hardly resembles classical epics in style or in content, considering that the authors are primarily concerned with deconstructing the story and its characters and devising their own explanations for specific problems. In true postmodern fashion, Atwood and Barth focus on the characters whose perspectives are neglected or insufficiently explored in the epic, or those who are completely marginalized and even anonymous, but perform quite intriguing roles. The aim is not to completely replace the existing narratives with new ones which would in turn become dominant, but to indicate that the canonical texts can be read in many different ways.

2.1 The Source Texts

For both Atwood and Barth, Homer’s *Odyssey* is a starting point and the narrative basis of their own storytelling. The authors composed their works under the assumption that their readers were sufficiently familiar with the basic plot of the epic, if not with the alternative versions found in other sources. The readers’ familiarity with the original text is crucial, since both writers focus on minor episodes or those considered to be digressions. The basis of “Menelaiad” is Book 4 of Homer’s *Odyssey*, depicting Telemachus’s visit to Menelaus in Sparta. This is, however, only one of seven narrative levels presented in this story, each containing an episode from the life of the Spartan king: his encounter with Helen in Troy, his return voyage to Sparta, his stay on the island of Pharos and encounters with Proteus and his daughter Eidothea.

The source of “Anonymiad” is an even more obscure episode from Book 3, referring to events at Agamemnon’s court. The title character is a court minstrel who was ordered to keep watch over Agamemnon’s wife Clytemnestra while the king was away in Troy and who was subsequently taken to a desert island by Aegisthus, Clytemnestra’s lover, and left there to perish:

And there was a man, what's more, a bard close by,
 to whom Agamemnon, setting sail for Troy,
 gave strict commands to guard his wife. But then,
 that day the doom of the gods had bound her to surrender,
 Aegisthus shipped the bard away to a desert island,
 marooned him there, sweet prize for the birds of prey,
 and swept her off to his own house, lover lusting for lover. (Homer 1996, 116)

These seven lines served as a foundation for Barth's story, in which the minstrel's tragic destiny is depicted from his own angle – blinded by his love of Merope, both his lover and muse,¹ the minstrel was duped into sailing to the desert island and, now abandoned, is trying to compose his life story using the materials available to him: squid ink and goat hide. Apart from those from the Trojan myth, "Anonymiad" presents other characters from Greek mythology; Barth refers to the nine muses, using their names to mark the amphorae from which the minstrel drinks his wine. The story is largely an experiment in metafiction, with the minstrel discussing his poetics and informing readers about the alternative versions he was considering. Apart from the pieces of traditional minstrelsy, he claims he has also written "imagined versions, some satiric" of what happened in Troy and Mycenae:

I wrote a version wherein Agamemnon kills his brother, marries Helen, and returns to Lacedemon instead of to Mycenae; another in which he himself is murdered by Clytemnestra, who arranges as well the assassination of the other expeditionary princes and thus becomes empress of both Hellas and Troy, with Paris as her consort and Helen as her cook – until all are slain by young Orestes, who then shares the throne with Merope, adored by him since childhood despite the difference in their birth. (Barth 1988, 193)

Such sections should remind us that the stories recorded by Homer or any other author are man-made fictions created in specific circumstances and therefore only some of the numerous possible versions.

Whereas Barth's stories focus on particular episodes in the lives of their protagonists, Atwood's *The Penelopiad* is a more comprehensive account of Penelope's life (and death). The narrative is introduced by two passages quoted from the *Odyssey*,² which describe Odysseus's encounter with Agamemnon's soul in Hades and the hanging of the maids by Telemachus upon his father's return to Ithaca. Referring to two shorter episodes in Homer's epic, the two epigraphs introduce the main characters of Atwood's narrative, the "faithful," "flawless," and "constant" Penelope, who loyally "kept the memory of the husband of her youth" and the twelve hanged maids, as "long-winged thrushes or doves [...] entangled in a snare" with heads in a row, nooses round their necks, and feet twitching in the air (Atwood 2006, xiii). The anonymity of the maids is retained, and Melantho ("of the Pretty Cheeks") is the only one with a personal name. The lines quoted from the original text point to the marginalized positions of these

¹ In Greek mythology, Merope is one of the seven Pleiades, the only one who married a mortal, Sisyphus.

² Lines 191–4 from Book 24 and lines 470–3 from Book 22, which is indicated by Atwood.

characters in the *Odyssey*, with Penelope defined in relation to her husband and the maids unnamed and considered as a collective, which will be sharply contrasted by their central positions and the first-person narration in *The Penelopiad*.

Although their narratives refer to specific lines from Homer's epic, the *Odyssey* is not the only source on which Atwood and Barth base their stories. Barth uses alternative accounts of Helen's absence from Sparta, primarily those from Robert Graves's *Greek Myths*. For both authors this work is of great importance, as it contains a range of sources, including works by Herodotus, Pausanias, Apollodorus, and Hyginus. In her introductory address, Atwood warns that "Homer's *Odyssey* is not the only version of the story," the mythic material being oral and local, "told one way in one place and quite differently in another" (Atwood 2006, xx) and, as we subsequently find out from the Notes section at the end of the book, the works she consulted in search of other versions are Robert Graves's *Greek Myths*, Homeric Hymns, and Lewis Hyde's *Trickster Makes This World*. Particularly interesting in this context is Hyde's study, which presents Odysseus as one of the trickster figures, a "polytropic" character – wily, versatile, and much-travelled (Hyde 1998, 52). Although the study focuses on male figures already canonized as tricksters, in an appendix Hyde also examines the relation between the trickster and gender. Observing that "the canonical tricksters are male because they are part of patriarchal mythology," Hyde wonders "why, if tricksters are disruptive and oppositional, they wouldn't be female *especially* in patriarchy" (Hyde 1998, 340). Atwood's *Penelopiad* responds to this question by showing that Penelope *is* a trickster figure, a woman who displays cunning and artifice and performs a much more active part than is commonly assumed.

For both Barth and Atwood, these episodes from the *Odyssey* are specific points where the two authors enter into a dialogue with the myth. Driven by unresolved narrative issues, both authors, more or less explicitly, indicate which questions have provoked them to imagine what is behind and beyond the well-known story. The key issue addressed in "Menelaiad," repeatedly voiced in the lines of the title character, is what prompted Helen to choose Menelaus over many other attractive suitors. In *The Penelopiad*, the problem questions are stated in the Introduction to the novel: "What led to the hanging of the maids, and what was Penelope really up to?" (Atwood 2006, xxi). The first seems to be more intriguing to the author, as she has "always been haunted by the hanged maids" (Atwood 2006, xxi), and although the title indicates that this is Penelope's epic, Atwood's novel has two main characters – Penelope and the twelve maids taken collectively.

2.2 The Narration

The fact that Atwood and Barth assign the leading roles to the characters who occupy ostensibly supporting roles in the *Odyssey* (Penelope and Menelaus), or are completely marginalized and even unnamed (the twelve hanged maids and the anonymous minstrel left on a desert island), is in line with the postmodern tendency of giving voice to the silenced ones. In contrast to the *Odyssey*, which is narrated from a third-person omniscient point of view, in these postmodern *-iads* the stories are presented through a first-person narration – the first person singular in the case of Penelope, Menelaus, and the minstrel,³

³ As denoted in the story itself, the minstrel is narrating his story in the "first person anonymous."

the first person plural in the case of the maids – and the narrators are both focalizers of and participants in the narrated events. Their cognitive advantage is the spatial and temporal distance from which they tell their stories and which provides them with a broader – albeit limited – perspective on past events. Penelope and the maids speak from Hades, where they are active as spirits and still afflicted by past wrongs. Though Penelope states, “Now that I’m dead I know everything,” she is aware that her current position is only quasi-omniscient, that her perspective is limited to her personal experiences, and therefore adds, “This is what I wished would happen, but like so many of my wishes it failed to come true. I know only a few factoids that I didn’t know before” (Atwood 2006, 1).

In “Menelaïad” the question of narration is complicated by the fact that Menelaus the king of Sparta appears as the narrator at six different levels, six different points in space and time, whereas the all-encompassing frame story is told by the voice which “isn’t the voice of Menelaus; this voice *is* Menelaus; all there is of him” (Barth 1988, 130). This disembodied entity, who in its final incarnation at the end of the story defines him- (or her-)self as “the absurd, unending possibility of love” (Barth 1988, 167), accentuates the instability of the inner six levels narrated by Menelaus in his lifetime.

In both Atwood and Barth the first-person narration and the narrators’ involvement in the story suggest personal perspectives that add new interpretations to the canonized version of the myth, but also indicate the narrators’ subjective points of view and biased depictions of events and characters, i.e. their unreliability. This is easily perceived in Atwood, where Penelope’s story at times collides with the version told by the maids. Penelope’s devastation on hearing about the death of her young maids is disputed by the maids’ claim that the queen not only knew about their hanging but instigated it in an attempt to save her reputation and her life. This claim is voiced in the “Chorus Line: The Perils of Penelope: A Drama,” where Melanthe announces: “There is another story. / Or several, as befits the goddess Rumour, / Who’s sometimes in a good, or else bad, humour” (Atwood 2006, 147). Discussing the appearance of “conflicting versions of events” in novels based on the minor-character elaboration, Jeremy Rosen observes that such narratives indicate “the myriad potential variations of number and reliability of narrative voices available,” but also that “the technique of embedding competing narratives merely represents an extension or refinement of the skepticism in which the genre is rooted” (Rosen 2016, 109–10).⁴ The “rumour” in the lines quoted above makes it doubtful whether the play the maids perform is a kind of *Mousetrap* for Penelope, or only some court gossip.

Atwood’s and Barth’s revisions of the *Odyssey* are to a large extent stories about storytelling, and this is emphasized by the narrative techniques. The works by both authors display daring experimentation with form and genre and even lean towards multimedia. Barth’s collection, written at the time when McLuhan’s theory on the new media was gaining ground, is subtitled “Fiction for print, tape, live voice,” with each story intended to be performed in a specific way. As the “Author’s Note” at the beginning of the book indicates, the stories “Menelaïad” and “Anonymiad” were designated for “printed voice” and for print, respectively. Atwood introduces several genres in the chapters narrated by the maids, including a record

⁴ Rosen considers the minor character elaboration as a distinct genre of postmodern fiction.

of “The Trial of Odysseus” allegedly “videotaped by the maids.” The maids’ chapters are titled “Chorus Lines,” which evokes both the chorus of the ancient Greek drama and contemporary musical productions and thus combines the pathos of classical literature with the burlesque of the modern age. That Atwood was concerned with the form of presentation as much as the content is confirmed by the fact that two years after the publication of the novel, *The Penelopiad* was performed as a play at the Royal Shakespeare Company’s Swan Theatre in Stratford-upon-Avon.

The story of Menelaus unravels through seven narrative levels, which form an intricate pattern of concentric circles, with narratives framing and framed by other narratives. This Chinese-box structure is marked by chapter numbers ascending from 1 to 7 and then descending from 7 to 1, but also by a complex and rather confusing punctuation, which makes it necessary for readers to be well acquainted with the original myth to follow who is talking to whom, when, and where. This is of particular importance in places where the characters “jump” from one narrative level into another within the same chapter, as is the case when the conversation between Menelaus and Peisistratus is suddenly interrupted by Proteus’s words sounded from one of the previous narrative levels (indicated, too, through Barth’s copious quotation marks):

“‘My own questions,’ Peisistratus insisted, ‘had to do with mannered rhetoric and your shift of narrative viewpoint.’

“‘Ignore that fool!’ Proteus ordered from the beach.”

“‘How can Proteus –’ ‘Seer.’ ‘So.’ (Barth 1988, 154)

Atwood’s *Penelopiad*, on the other hand, is an experiment in genre-mixing. Accompanying the chapters with the traditional linear storytelling performed by Penelope are the “Chorus Lines,” the chapters composed in various generic techniques and narrated by the twelve hanged maids. The maids enter into a dialogue with the main story told by Penelope and respond to the chapters immediately preceding theirs by offering their perspective on the topic at hand. For instance, Penelope’s chapter “My Childhood” is followed by “The Chorus Line: Kiddie Mourn, A Lament by the Maids,” in which the maids tell about their childhoods: “We too were children. We too were born to the wrong parents. Poor parents, slave parents, peasant parents, and serf parents” (Atwood 2006, 13). The maids narrate their collective story in verse and prose – in the shape of a nursery rhyme, a popular tune, an idyll in long free verse, a sea shanty, a ballad, a love song, a drama in iambic pentameter and rhyming couplets, an anthropology lecture, and a dramatic rendering of a court trial. These “lyrical interludes,” as Susanne Jung designates them, serve as a “performative enactment of the silenced female voices of the *Odyssey*,” but also as “an invitation extended to the reader to go in search of silenced voices haunting other texts of the Western literary canon” (Jung 2014/2015, 42). The variety of genres in which the maids’ story is presented contributes to better visibility of their chapters, which stand conspicuously apart from Penelope’s uniform prose narrative in a way that secures them special attention from the reader. In the story of the hanged maids, Atwood performs a deep reconsideration of the myth, and the generic experimentation should additionally highlight its significance.

2.3 The Heroes and the Heroines

The stories told by Atwood and Barth are personal stories of individual characters (or a group of characters) developed to convey not only the course of events, but also the narrators' distinctive lines of reasoning, emotions, attitudes, and value systems. As such, they reflect a broader tendency which implies "commitment to a subjectivist perspectivism compatible with the reigning tenets of liberal pluralism" characteristic of works with formerly minor characters as protagonists (Rosen 2016, 89). In the *Odyssey*, Menelaus and Penelope are at best supporting characters, as the spouses of more important personalities. As a king and a warrior, Menelaus also performs a distinguished social role, but this is far more prominently presented in the *Iliad*, whereas the *Odyssey* depicts him in his domestic setting. Penelope is primarily defined through her relationship with Odysseus and her role of a faithful and patiently waiting wife, who does show considerable cunning in avoiding the advances of the suitors, but who is nevertheless rather passive. Disregarding the grand narratives of war and life voyage, Atwood and Barth turn their attention to the intimate stories of these characters, which bear more relevance to the world of their readers. Placed in everyday situations and presented as ordinary people speaking ordinary language, Penelope and Menelaus lose the aura of the epic but gain a new dimension of humanness and come across as flesh-and-blood individuals, occasionally weak and insecure, thus becoming characters to which contemporary readers could easily relate on a personal level. Similarly, the anonymous minstrel and the twelve maids are no longer mere performers of tasks assigned by society but become fully human fictional characters.

Both Penelope and Menelaus are prompted to narration by moments from their past that still bother them, both are trying to resolve these issues through their stories, and both are doing this while disembodied: Penelope is speaking from Hades, having been dead for millennia, and the narrator of the frame story in "Menelaiaid" is now only the voice of Menelaus. Atwood is particularly focused on the way Penelope is treated by men (her father, her husband, her son, and the suitors) and her responses to such treatment, as well as on her rivalry with other women (Helen most of all, but also the maids). The lines Atwood quotes in the epigraph refer to the "flawless" and "the constant Penelope" and thus evoke the proverbial faithfulness and patience of the eternal wife from Homer's epic. As Barbara Dell'abate-Çelebi points out, "faithfulness was not a choice in the ancient Greek world, as it was obligatory for women not to be adulterous;" nevertheless, her refusal to re-marry after many years of waiting can be seen as Penelope shirking her duties and is "extreme in a society like Ithaca" (Dell'abate-Çelebi 2016, 83). This is an indication of a strong will combined with the craftiness the queen of Ithaca displays in avoiding the suitors.

As Atwood herself has suggested, the presentation of Penelope in the *Odyssey* might be too simplistic, since we only see her weaving, waiting, crying, and in general, being exceptionally good, whereas, considering all circumstances, "she must have been doing a lot more than she's shown as doing in the *Odyssey*, because there's nobody else in charge of the outfit... She must have been a much more active, practical person than she's shown as being" (Tonkin 2005). Atwood's Penelope is telling her story from a considerable temporal distance from the narrated events, and her being a bodiless spirit of the underworld allows her to speak openly

and without fear of consequences. She does not enjoy her role of a faithful wife, “an edifying legend,” “a stick used to beat other women with,” and urges future women not to follow her example (Atwood 2006, 2). Throughout her narrative, we can see Penelope disappointed by her husband, who plays unexpected tricks on her and whom she suspects of unfaithfulness and lying. The memory of her wedding when Odysseus managed to win her hand is fraught with the feeling that he too was only trying to enhance his wealth and social status, that she was promised to him as “payment” for a service rendered to her uncle and handed over “like a package of meat” (Atwood 2006, 39). We see her haunted by the question why her father, King Icarius of Sparta, threw her in the sea when she was a baby; she is also depicted as the mother of a rebellious youth, Telemachus, who is growing increasingly disrespectful to her as he feels that he should not receive orders and lectures from a woman.

Penelope’s story offers an insight into the social mores and customs of ancient times, which are quite relatable to modern society. The domestic troubles besetting Atwood’s heroine and her responses to them are aspects to which 21st-century readers (particularly the female ones) can most easily relate and which most plainly position myths as conveyors of universal human experience. *The Penelopiad* also provides a glimpse into the circumstances in Hades – the interactions between the dead, the punishments administered in the dark grottoes, the outings to the world of the living, the dead being summoned by the living for advice and prophesies. The present Penelope, that is, her disembodied spirit, comes across as rather straightforward, intrepid, and curious (since she shows great interest in modern inventions, such as the light bulb), although she still lacks self-confidence when confronted with Helen. In *The Penelopiad* we observe Penelope changing from a timid and insecure fifteen-year-old bride to a strong woman keeping the household, taking charge and becoming an expert at bargaining, farming, and trading. Penelope is also quite censorious not only of the behavior of her husband, whose stories of sea-faring peril she disputes, offering more realistic versions of events, but also of the gods, whom she portrays as capricious and sadistic. Such presentation of Penelope’s thoughts and feelings contrasts sharply with the submissiveness implied in the image of a patient and lenient wife.

The frame story of “Menelaiad” is narrated by what is left of Menelaus, his voice, speaking from a vantage point that offers a better understanding not only of what has been bothering him most – his relationship with Helen – but also of himself as Menelaus, the Spartan king, at different points in his quest for truth. The inner levels of narration, each embedded in the previous and framing the next, present different episodes from Menelaus’s life, in each of which Menelaus the narrator is addressing different characters: Telemachus and Peisistratus in Sparta, Helen on the ship, Proteus on Pharos, Eidothea also on Pharos, Helen in Troy, and Helen in their bed. At the center of each story is Menelaus’s doubt about his wife’s feelings and her faithfulness, so that the powerful king of Sparta, who once managed to move thousands of Achaeans against the city of Troy, is presented as an ordinary husband vexed by domestic troubles. This could be a wealthy landlord or businessman welcoming guests, showing them around his home and trying to impress them with luxurious goods he acquired on his travels, while all the time keeping an eye on his flirting wife. Such dethronement of an epic hero produces a comic effect but offers another possible way of looking into the classical epic. Like Penelope in Atwood, Barth’s Menelaus becomes a character with a complex emotional life

and developed psychology who undergoes significant changes throughout the story. At first unable to grasp that Helen chose him for such a simple reason as love, Menelaus will eventually accept Proteus's advice: "Helen chose you without reason because she loves you without cause; embrace her without question and watch your weather change. Let go" (Barth 1988, 161). Only after Menelaus has abandoned the rational approach will his tale start to disentangle, and he will be able to "let go": "I believe all. I understand nothing. I love you" (Barth 1988, 162).

Of particular interest in Atwood's and Barth's postmodern epics are the destinies of the anonymous characters: the maids and the minstrel. That both Barth and Atwood focus on characters originally presented only by their professions again reflects the postmodern tendency to bring marginalized groups on stage and into the spotlight. On the one hand, these characters become representatives of their social strata and gain a symbolic quality – the anonymous minstrel becomes a proto-poet, a forefather of all future bards and artists in general, who made a lasting contribution to literature by inventing *in medias res* as a type of narration; the maids come to symbolize the faithfulness betrayed by those who were supposed to protect them. On the other hand, the minstrel and the maids narrate their personal stories of their childhood and youth, their love life and entertainment.

The tragic destiny of the maids is what inspired Atwood to write *The Penelopiad* – choosing the topic for the *Canongate Myth Series*, "out of my unconscious, where I keep so many things, there appeared in particular the hanged maids, who have always bothered me about the *Odyssey*" (Tonkin 2005).⁵ In Atwood's novel, the maids offer alternative versions of the events in Ithaca, occasionally contradicting Penelope, but they also give an account of their own tragic fate;⁶ born as slaves, with few joyful events in their lives, they end up hanged by Telemachus, their peer and childhood playmate. The symbolism of the number twelve is clarified in a separate chapter titled "An Anthropology Lecture," and "Presented by: The Maids." Aside from "twelve apostles," the "twelve days of Christmas" and the "twelve months" of the year, the maids here establish a connection to mythical, pre-patriarchal times and suggest that their rape and hanging "represent the overthrow of a matrilineal moon-cult by an incoming group of usurping patriarchal father-god-worshipping barbarians" (Atwood 2006, 165). What is not explicitly suggested in the novel, but is at least an intriguing coincidence, is that the number of maids equals the number of jurors at a murder trial. The maids are the victims, but they also act as jurors, since there is nobody else either to plead their case or deliver a verdict. They haunt Penelope and Penelope's story, but they do this in an apparently playful manner, through a variety of prose and poetic forms. However, the person the maids haunt most of all is Odysseus, who cannot avoid them even in his afterlife. Penelope intimates that the maids make it impossible for the two of them to be together in Hades: "He sees them in the distance, heading our way. They make him nervous. They make him restless. They cause him pain. They make him want to be anywhere and anyone else" (Atwood 2006, 189). She has even tried to intervene and persuade them to stop haunting him, but the maids are persistent and in the final chapter, with an ironic title "We're Walking Behind You, A Love

⁵ We can observe Atwood's interest in maids in her other works, as well, both poetry and prose, and perhaps most notably in *The Handmaid's Tale*, where the maids undergo similar psychological and physical torture.

⁶ Although there are twelve of them, the singular is appropriate here since they are regarded as one entity throughout the novel.

Song,” they declare: “We’re the serving girls, we’re here to serve you. We’re here to serve you right. We’ll never leave you, we’ll stick to you like your shadow, soft and relentless as glue. Pretty maids, all in a row” (Atwood 2006, 193).

Penelope has been haunted by her maids ever since her youth, when she resented their mocking, lascivious jokes on her wedding day. In the years of waiting for Odysseus’s return, she has succeeded in making an alliance with some of them, the twelve maids that will be executed, and in turning them into her confidantes. However, Penelope’s dubious role in their hanging leaves room to wonder what kind of relationship existed between them. In presenting the tensions between Penelope and the maids, Atwood explores one of the recurrent themes of her works: rivalry between women and the strain of living in a culture “where women are trained in both self-surveillance and in exercising the surveillant gaze over other women” (Davies 2006, 62). As in the case of Atwood’s earlier works, *The Penelopiad* places women in a world where they are pitted against each other and forced to win their place by destroying the others. Just as Penelope disregards the plights of the maids but uses them as instruments to preserve her position, so the maids haunt Penelope, her husband, and her story, seeking revenge.

2.4 Helen the Cousin, Helen the Goat

The fact that the focalizers of Atwood’s and Barth’s works are less prominent and even unnamed characters does not imply that those who play the leading roles in Homer’s epics are marginalized or absent in these narratives. A character who receives considerable attention and undergoes significant transformation in the course of the postmodern demythologizing is Helen of Troy, or Helen of Sparta, Menelaus’s wife and Penelope’s cousin. Rumored to be Zeus’s daughter, and therefore half-goddess, Helen is traditionally represented as a woman of outstanding beauty. When the Trojan prince Paris takes her away from her husband and her home, Helen becomes the immediate cause of the Trojan War, or as Christopher Marlowe famously phrased it, “the face that launched a thousand ships” (Marlowe 1967, 80). Helen’s prominent position in classical mythology is undisputed, owing to the grand significance of the Trojan War itself; just as the fall of Troy represents “the myth of national origins for Western Europe,” or even “a secular Fall,” Helen can be said to hold “the status of a secular Eve” (Suzuki 1989, 13). The accounts from the classical literature differ in their views on Helen’s virtue, on whether she eloped with Paris or was abducted, whether her actions were directed by the gods or her own will, and whether she was in Troy at all. The disagreements over the question whether Helen’s elopement can be considered the *casus belli* have been fostered by historical accounts claiming that the Trojan War was fought for purely economic reasons, which diminishes her role in it. However, in popular imagination, Helen is a woman whose stunning beauty became the cause of the greatest conflict in ancient times, and this perspective is the starting point for Atwood’s and Barth’s revisionist narratives.

In Barth’s “Menelaiad” Helen is the focal point of the narration, and her name is the first word Menelaus utters to begin his story:

“Helen,” I say: “Helen’s responsible for this. From the day we lovers sacrificed the horse in Argos, pastureland of horses, and swore on its bloody joints to be her champions

forever, whichever of us she chose, to the night we huddled in the horse in Troy while she took the part of all our wives – everything’s Helen’s fault.” (Barth 1988, 130)

Judging by Menelaus’s posture in Homer’s *Odyssey*, Helen’s betrayal can be considered the crucial event of his life, so that

his identity is solely that of a betrayed husband. Despite the Achaean victory and Helen’s return, despite the riches gained in his seven years of wandering before returning to Sparta, Menelaus cannot be content, since he is unable to refrain from looking backward to the traumatic disruption of his domestic peace and to the war that came in its wake. (Suzuki 1989, 64)

Barth builds his story on the hurt feelings of this enraged, confused, and most likely cuckolded husband, and since Menelaus is the focalizer of the events, Helen is presented less as a half-goddess of mythical beauty and more as a cunning, deceitful, and flirtatious woman. Helen appears on all narrative levels of Menelaus’s story, both as the subject of his narration and as his interlocutor, and her words are central to the narrative, in the metaphorical and physical sense: the word “love,” as an answer to Menelaus’s key question, is positioned in the middle of “Menelaiad.” Helen is depicted as intelligent, astute and resourceful, but also as a lustful woman who is constantly trying to seduce everybody, including their much younger guests, Telemachus and Peisistratus. Menelaus scornfully observes her engaged in domestic duties (such as knitting) and makes sarcastic comments on her outward resemblance to Penelope, whereas Helen seems to disregard her husband’s moroseness and complacently continues with her usual activities.

While “Menelaiad” presents Helen as an ordinary human, in “Anonymiad” she is utterly dehumanized and becomes a goat. The anonymous minstrel left on a desert island has only goats and amphorae of wine to keep him company and provide entertainment. He kills the goats for food and uses their hides to write his story, which he puts in the empty amphorae and casts into the sea. Helen is the last goat left, and the fact that she has outlived the others is hardly an accident, since she seems to be quite resourceful. The minstrel names her “Helen,” for “so epic fair she seemed to me in my need, and cause of so great vain toil,” but he also observes that the difficulty of catching her distinguishes Helen the goat from Helen the queen, since the latter “had never been so hard to get” (Barth 1988, 197). The minstrel’s comments have an immediate comic effect but also express censure and ridicule of this formerly elevated character.

Penelope’s perspective on Helen is that of a woman and a cousin. Female characters and the complicated relationships between them, fraught with rivalry, jealousy and insecurity, are among the core themes of Atwood’s fiction and *The Penelopiad* is no exception. Penelope envies Helen for being more famous and more beautiful, as well as for never having been punished in childhood, which contrasts with her own father’s attempt to drown her. Penelope cannot help comparing herself to Helen, and this makes her feel insecure and inferior. Even after death, Helen seems to be more popular: the magicians summoning the dead are much more interested in Helen than in Penelope, which Penelope acknowledges as understandable, but with a pinch of bitterness and sarcasm:

If you were a magician, messing around in the dark arts and risking your soul, would you want to conjure up a plain but smart wife who'd been good at weaving and had never transgressed, instead of a woman who'd driven hundreds of men mad with lust and had caused a great city to go up in flames?

Neither would I. (Atwood 2006, 22)

However, Penelope is by no means reconciled to her cousin's superior status and constantly tries to present her in a bad light.

Penelope's vision of Helen is similar to Menelaus's: she depicts her cousin as a woman "who loved to make conquests just to show she could" (Atwood 2006, 29), who would "flirt with her dog, with her mirror, with her comb, with her bedpost. She needed to keep in practice" (2006, 33), and who smiles dazzlingly in a way that would induce any man to think "that secretly she was in love with him alone" (2006, 42). According to Penelope, Helen seeks constant attention from everybody and is extremely vain. On the day of Penelope's wedding to Odysseus, Helen makes herself the central figure of the event, not only with her "intolerable beauty," but also with her snide comments about the bride and groom.

Penelope blames Helen for her own domestic misfortune. In the chapter entitled "Helen Ruins My Life," Penelope blames her cousin for the Trojan War and Odysseus's departure from Ithaca. Atwood's heroine has no doubts about this; the "wicked" Helen ran away with Paris of her own will; and the two of them even laughed at the Greek emissaries who came to reclaim the Spartan queen and the riches she had taken from the court. Penelope recounts the circumstances of Helen's first abduction by Theseus, which caused another war, and asserts that Helen even takes pride in the number of men who died for her – "she took their deaths as a tribute to herself" (Atwood 2006, 75). In Penelope's eyes, Helen is a vain and ambitious woman, craving attention and causing trouble for other people.

Helen haunts Penelope even in their afterlives, as is seen from their encounter in Hades, on Helen's way to her "spiritual bath." As always, Helen is followed by many male admirers (now all spirits) and speaks to Penelope in her usual condescending manner. An established view on these two characters is challenged when Helen confronts her cousin with an unexpected question: "How many men did Odysseus butcher because of you?" (Atwood 2006, 155). Much condemned as a woman whose actions led to the death of thousands of brave warriors, Helen puts a question revealing that Penelope too could be accused of the same "crime." Atwood takes no sides in her revision of the *Odyssey*, as her retold epic marks the places that merit more contemplation and asserts that nothing should be taken at face value. Helen's comment prompts us to view Penelope's position from another angle and suggests that considering Penelope an epitome of goodness and innocence might be oversimplification.

3 Conclusion

As Linda Hutcheon observes, "myths and conventions exist for a reason, and postmodernism investigates that reason. The postmodern impulse is not to seek any total vision. It merely questions" (Hutcheon 2004, 48). Atwood and Barth were driven by specific questions about

the *Odyssey* and based their works on episodes that are sufficiently unexplored in Homer's epic to be suitable for imaginative re-examination and are also relevant to the contemporary context. The retellings examined in this paper do not intend to modify the original storyline, but to offer a critical reappraisal of the material from the epic itself, taking into account alternative versions from other sources and penetrating the psychology of individual characters. The narrators and focalizers of the stories are less prominent or completely marginalized characters from the *Odyssey*, and it is through their visions that we see the familiar epic heroes and heroines living ordinary lives. Certain features and situations briefly mentioned in the original epic, but mostly obscured by the elevated tone of the whole work, are now rendered ironic and humorous. Aside from the first-person narration, Atwood and Barth employ several characteristically postmodern devices, playfully experimenting with narrative levels and different genres, some of which even imply multimedia presentations. In this manner the authors compose postmodern epics to replenish classical myth by introducing new interpretations and new perspectives. The demythologizing of situations and characters is not intended to denigrate the epic, but to show that beneath each myth lies a story that is universal and timeless and can never be exhausted.

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